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## Medicare reform must have meaning

**BY JOHN KLINE**  
Guest Columnist

Reforming an ailing Medicare system and including a prescription drug benefit for senior citizens are among the most important issues we will debate in Congress. While our current system is in dire need of reform, we must not allow our desire to pass something to overshadow our responsibility to pass something meaningful.

For far too many years, the debate over Medicare has yielded little result. The time for kicking the can down the street is over: Now is the time to remedy an ailing Medicare system for every American, young and old. To do less is an abdication of our responsibilities as elected officials.

As the Medicare Trustees remind us year after year, the current Medicare system is not, in the long term, financially sound. According to the President's Fiscal Year 2004 Budget, the net present value shortfall for Medicare is \$13.3 trillion and growing. Unless health care costs to the Medicare system can be controlled as the baby-boom generation retires, the combination of increasing costs and the growing number of beneficiaries will cause the program to collapse under its own weight.

Nearly every man and woman in America — and their elected officials — agrees: Medicare without a prescription drug benefit is insufficient. I believe strongly in the importance of including a prescription drug benefit in Medicare, but I believe equally strongly in the need to avoid a massive, no-end-in-sight entitlement program that will bankrupt Medicare and burden our children. Unfortunately, rather than a means to an end, the promise of a prescription drug benefit has become the end itself.

If all we do is add an entitlement to an already shaky system, we will be guaranteeing the bankruptcy of a system our children and grandchildren will be relying on for their future health care needs. That is not acceptable.

Included in the bill passed Thursday by the House of Representatives is a framework for the fundamental restructuring the system needs. By allowing seniors the option of participating in a Federal Employees Health Benefit Program — similar to the plan available to members of Congress and their staffs for years — we can create a system capable of providing a prescription drug benefit without compromising the quality of services available to seniors today or the availability of care for future generations.

Unfortunately, as the bill continues to move through the congressional process, there is a real fear that essential reforms such as these may be compromised. That is why I and a growing group of my colleagues have come together to express our concerns to our leadership in the House of Representatives. In a letter I signed with 43 of my colleagues, we reiterated our support for the underlying reform necessary to create a sustainable Medicare system. Our efforts resulted in the inclusion of these important principles in the bill passed by the House of Representatives.

I remain optimistic that our efforts will now persuade members of the House-Senate Conference Committee to ensure these essential principles remain in the text of the bill eventually signed into law by President Bush.

As we take action on this issue, it is imperative we send a strong signal that we cannot settle for nominal reform. We must follow our consciences and lead by conviction to ensure the cure for our Medicare system is not worse than the illness.

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